

## The Solitary Rover: Niceties of Frankl's Logotherapy in Vallee's *Wild*

Jissmon K. J.

Research Scholar

Mahatma Gandhi University

Kottayam, Kerala, India

[jisskarackaljoseph@gmail.com](mailto:jisskarackaljoseph@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The meaninglessness of existential philosophy was celebrated and was at its peak until the formulation of the psychotherapeutic theories by Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist as well as a Holocaust survivor, Viktor Emil Frankl. Frankl introduced new psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic terms into the realm of studies related to the complexities of human mind. It was in his seminal work, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), that Frankl introduced the idea of Logotherapy, as a clinical as well as a psychological term. Frankl with his notion of logotherapy refuted the nihilistic aspects of existentialism and certain like philosophies." Here, the protagonist, Cheryl Strayed, in Vallee's *Wild* (2014) sets out for a journey to find out about herself and the ultimate meaning of her life. Cheryl, during her journey, leaves all of her material possessions and familial relations behind. Here, one may tend to see her as an "existential "one but in a more wider sense, she is not celebrating the meaninglessness, rather she strives hard to find a meaning in her life to live on. This paper opens a new outlook towards this movie, especially towards the character of Cheryl Strayed.

Keywords: Logotherapy, Self, Meaning, Existentialism, Life

## Introduction

If travelling makes one find happiness and meaning in this world, it is true for Cheryl Strayed. The life of Cheryl Strayed can be considered as a series of miseries and misfortunes. But what is to be noted here is that, even though she suffers, she always manages to find meaning in it. From a logotherapy point of view, one could say that the character of Cheryl Strayed is an embodiment of this ceaseless search for meaning which eventually she attains. She successfully converts her pains into meanings to move on in life further.

Written by Nick Hornby and directed by Jean-Marc Vallée, the movie *Wild* (2014) takes its origins from a memoir written by Cheryl Strayed in 2012, titled *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, which deals with a real-life account of her journey to the Pacific Crest Trail. In a metaphorical sense, the journey is indeed one from meaninglessness to meaning. The title of the memoir even points toward this. The movie was a successful one with a huge array of great performers like Reese Witherspoon (Cheryl Strayed), Laura Dern (Bobbi), Thomas Sadoski (Paul), Michiel Huisman (Jonathan) and Gaby Hoffmann (Aimee).

## The Solitary Rover

The question that concerns is how Cheryl Strayed succeeds in her quest for meaning and her final attainment of it? The answer can be found within the movie itself. Like all those characters that set out for a journey towards meaning, Cheryl is also inspired by some tragic or traumatic events in her life. What needs to be considered are the aspects of logotherapy that act as the driving force or rather sole means for Cheryl towards her final attainment of meaning. While analyzing the movie we can say that Cheryl is prompted to take a journey towards salvation and meaning by impetus from the traumatic experience in her family and personal life. Whatever life holds in store for someone, the important thing is to note that, there is always a notion of meaning in one form or another. That is the main reason why Cheryl does not get desperate at the end and become able to let go of her traumatic past. It is

through the will to meaning that one's life moves forward. In his *The Unheard Cry for Meaning* (1978), Frankl says that "The will to meaning is not only a matter of faith but also a fact" (31). The thirst for meaning is so irresistible that one always go after it, but that realization does not come free for there must be something, some kind of "push" behind that. This is where the idea of "Tragic Triad" by Frankl comes into value. Here, by the word "tragic triad" what Frankl says is all about those aspects of human existence which may be restricted by the notions of pain, guilt, and death.

The meaning of Cheryl's life is affected by an amalgam of pain and guilt. In terms of the tragic triad, Cheryl encompasses the notion of guilt, too, along with it. This can be noted down as the pain which comes from Cheryl's mother Bobbi's death and guilt that derives from the promiscuous life that she leads after this. Bobbi's death from cancer sends Cheryl into a deep depression. In the movie itself there come some depictions regarding the childhood of Cheryl and about the abusive alcoholic father. After he left them, Bobbi had to try hard to make the ends meet. The deep love of Cheryl for her mother is clear from the way she remembers her during her hike. The sudden death of Bobbi is indeed a shock for her that it even destroys the will to meaning of Cheryl's life and ends up creating an "existential frustration" and "vacuum" in her life. She suddenly feels ultimate meaninglessness in her life. It is by this "void" that is created in her that she eventually feels the existential vacuum. Now she is caught in between the worlds of depression and meaninglessness. The meaning she has been making with her mother comes to cease with the demise of her mother. Melvin A. Kimble in *Viktor Frankl's Contribution to Spirituality and Aging* (2000) says that:

Personal meanings do not develop in a vacuum. A phenomenological analysis of the immediate data of the actual life experience of an individual reveals sources of meaning in that person's life (Kimble 15).

In this case, the meaning of Cheryl's life gets devastated by the death of her mother. The deep resentment towards her father and this recent trauma makes her go crazy and out of line. The phenomena such as depression, addiction and aggression in Cheryl's life directly come out of this very notion of vacuum. In the movie, we can see how Cheryl, out of depression, yields herself to drugs (heroin) and a promiscuous life (will to pleasure). She even gets pregnant but manages to get an abortion. From a logotherapeutic point of view, it is the vacuum that directly paves the way toward this kind of act. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl accounts that:

Moreover, there are various masks and guises under which the existential vacuum appears. Sometimes the frustrated will to meaning is vicariously compensated for by a will to power, including the most primitive form of the will to power, the will to money. In other cases, the place of frustrated will to meaning is taken by the will to pleasure. That is why existential frustration often eventuates in sexual compensation. We can observe in such cases that the sexual libido becomes rampant in the existential vacuum (112).

This passage depicts the facts why Cheryl submits herself to her sexual libido – to fill the “vacuum” within her. This promiscuity of Cheryl is the pivotal act which later directs her life to a meaningful one. This very act is also the reason for the breakdown of her married life with Paul. Cheryl, in this sense, completes the inevitable triad by adding the notion of guilt into it. Her guilt consciousness can be also related to “pain” in a wider sense. Now starts the journey of Cheryl to her meaning. According to the postulates of logotherapy, a man can find meaning in three ways: by doing some work, by encountering something or someone or by the act of suffering. Cheryl resolves to find meaning by suiting herself to the second and third notions of this “meaning triangle,” that is, by encountering something or someone and through suffering.

Taking the act of suffering into account, we can say that the majority of Cheryl's life finds meaning with the help of this notion. Like said before, the tragic triad becomes pertinent here. It is well clear the "death" of Bobbi and the "pain" that comes from it is mutually dependent on each other. When the guilt factor directly conforms to her cheating of her husband, Paul, the other two are closely related to her mother. In Cheryl's case the chain of sufferings starts from the abusive father and ends in her own mental sufferings. The death of her mother is the catalyst which fostered her pain. From a logotherapeutic point of view, there is a greater meaning in suffering and this very act of suffering does not make one's life void of meaning but provides plenty of meanings. Frankl notes down this idea like this,

If there is a meaning in life at all, there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete (76).

The acts of suffering that she has to endure are those which cannot be reversed. In childhood, Cheryl suffered the cruelties of her abusive father and witnessed the very act of his cruelty towards her mother, Bobbi. But despite this, she had managed to find solace with her mother. The untimely death of Bobbi unleashes the torrents of suffering and pain upon Cheryl. Even though she does lose herself for a short period unable to cope up with the pain, in the end, she decides to convert this suffering into meaning. Soon after Bobbi's death, she starts to find meaning in drugs and sex and ends up destroying her relationship with Paul. When she finds out how wrong her "ways" are, she decides to set out for a journey. She comes into terms with the reality only when she learns that there is a meaning in suffering. Losing someone does not mean that the whole meaning and purpose of life is gone. Rather it is a kind of another arena to find about oneself. As it is presented in the movie, during her hike towards the Pacific Crest Trail, we can see how Cheryl always ponders over the memories of her mother. It is these memories that always haunt her. At times she gets

desperate and even cries, but always manages to move on, too. Cheryl also has the feeling that she failed her mother in not being the kind of daughter her mother desired for. This is clear when she says that,

CHERYL: I gotta go back to that store. I'm gonna walk myself back to the woman my mother thought I was. I'm gonna put myself in the way of beauty (40:39).



Fig. 1. A scene from *Wild* (Source: Vallee, *Wild*. 2014)

Cheryl not only suffers from the pain of the death of Bobbi like said before, but she is also a victim of her actions, too. Her choice to being infidel with Paul also adds to her suffering, albeit they are divorced now. In the journey, there are a lot of situations where she thinks about Paul and their married life together. Paul even sends her letters during her journey. She comes into terms with these pains, related to both Bobbi and Paul, by the end of her journey. What we can see here is not a desperate woman but the one who has successfully converted the sufferings into meaning and happiness. The Trail, thus, stands as a symbol of ultimate meaning for her. Cheryl takes an optimistic attitude amid suffering which eventually ends up in her redemption. The meaning she creates through this act of suffering makes her a new woman with a redefined perspective. Rather than making herself yielded to the suffering,

she triumphantly goes above it, turning it into meaning with which she can go forward. One does not need to be ashamed of suffering since it is noble in itself. Cheryl holds on to this ideal and it is clear from the movie, too. As Frankl says,

Therefore, it was necessary to face up to the full amount of suffering, trying to keep moments of weakness and furtive tears to a minimum. But there was no need to be ashamed of tears, for tears bore witness that a man had the greatest of courage, the courage to suffer (86).

From the point of view of physical suffering, the journey she takes through the woods is a hideous one. In the opening scene itself we are shown the image of Cheryl, whose toenail has fallen off. During the movie, we can see the physical hardships that she has to endure. At one point, she has to starve since she brought the wrong type of gas for her stove. Under the crouching sun, she gets dehydrated and out of water. Walking through the woods using undersized shoes also causes her feet to bleed. Even though these cannot be compared with that grade of her mental sufferings, still in a general sense, these can also be considered.



Fig. 2. A scene from *Wild* (Source: Vallee, *Wild*. 2014)

Her hiking to the Pacific Crest Trail is the manifestation of the second notion towards meaning. After getting a divorce from Paul, she starts her journey. Here the destination called the Pacific Crest Trail is not just a place but an idea of meaning for her. For her getting there is like getting into the meaning and happiness of her own life. The natural world provides her with sufficient knowledge which eventually helps in her self-realization. During the journey, she passes by several places full of serenity and natural beauty. At some points along the trail, including at the end of the bridge, Cheryl encounters a red fox, which she interprets as carrying the spirit of her mother watching over her. Sometimes it is better to say that the mind and nature are closely related. For Cheryl, along with nature, the world of books also serves as a source of meaning. When she comes in between some difficult situations or having a feeling of ennui she seeks help in books. In the movie, there is a scene where she quotes from Adrienne Rich's *Power*,

CHERYL: Today a backhoe divulged out of a crumbling flank of earth, one bottle amber, perfect, a hundred-year-old cure for fever or melancholy, a tonic for living on this earth (16:48).



Fig. 3. A scene from *Wild* (Source: Vallee, *Wild*. 2014)

The way she adds her name with famous authors after quoting them in those trail registers can also be read as a way to make meaning out of it. For example, when she quotes Robert Frost from his poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, she writes, “But I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep.” Robert Frost and Cheryl Strayed.” Other than Frost, Cheryl also quotes from James Michener, Flannery O’Connor, and Emily Dickinson. By adding her name with them she metaphorically makes herself an accomplice with the real authors, thus relating the ‘lines’ to herself and her life. This is another way for her to meaning. The most important aspect of this way of finding meaning comes to light when the notion of “people” pops up. This is one of the major ways by which Cheryl finds her meaning. Apart from Bobbi, there are also other characters that play a significant role in Cheryl’s life. During her hike through the wilderness and woods what she yearns for the most is the very aspect of human presence and affection. In a scene, she says that,

CHERYL: I like to cook food. Eat food with other people. People, that’s another thing I like. I like talking to people, listening to people. Funny, that’s a hobby, one I hadn’t even realized I had. Until I decided to walk on my own through the fucking desert (21:47).

Cheryl is always driven towards people. Her act of socialization and bonding with the people she meets adds to this. With Frank and his wife she feels a kind of solace, and they provide her with a good meal and a warm shower. Greg also functions as a navigator for her. The meeting with Jonathan helps her to cut off those ties which remind her of the traumatic past relationship with Paul. Her best friend Aimee also functions as an inevitable part of her life. By experiencing another human being in his or her uniqueness and by the very act of love one can find meaning in life. Meeting new people like this creates a sense of meaning for Cheryl. What needs to be emphasized here is the idea of love. This can be achieved only by self-actualization, in terms of logotherapy. And one can achieve this only by the act of

self-transcendence. By the end of the movie, we can see the transformation of Cheryl into her self-actualization. She finds ultimate happiness and meaning in people and the love for them. She decides to marry again and have kids, thus making her life a meaningful one. The Trail, along with the people and places, gives her a new outlook. Cheryl at the end says,

CHERYL: And I didn't even know where I was going until I got there on the last day of my hike. Thank you, I thought over and over again, for everything the trail had taught me, and everything I couldn't yet know. How, in four years, I'd cross this very bridge. I'd marry a man in a spot almost visible from where I was standing. How, in nine years, that man and I would have a son named Carver, and a year later, a daughter named after my mother, Bobbi. I knew only that I didn't need to reach with my bare hands anymore. That seeing the fish beneath the surface of the water was enough. That it was everything. My life, like all lives, mysterious, irrevocable and sacred. So very close. So very present. So very belonging to me. How wild it was...to let it be (01:49:01).

This attitude of Cheryl demonstrates how she finally attains redemption and meaning in her life. The Trail finally culminates into her self-realization. Leaving the past behind, she decides to hold on to love and converts the act of suffering into meaning. As Frankl puts it, "The salvation of man is through love and in love" (49), Cheryl's salvation also comes in the forms of love and people, in human solidarity. That is why, in the end, she resolves to marry again and have kids. When she meets the boy named, Kyle, the song "Red River Valley" that he sings brings in her mind this very idea of love. Her life gets meaning only when she relates herself to other people. And at the end, she finds her meaning too.

Conclusion

What is demanded of man is not, as some existential philosophers teach, to endure the meaninglessness of life, but rather to bear his incapacity to grasp its unconditional meaningfulness in rational terms (Frankl 122).

After meticulous analysis one can say that the character of Cheryl Strayed is an embodiment of what Viktor Frankl called logotherapy. She is driven by the deep desire to find meaning in her life and eventually succeed too, despite the hardships, pain and sufferings she has to endure and overcome. The fact that the character is inspired by a real-life persona adds to the credibility of the events and ideas presented in the movie. The movie is also an eye-opener which exhorts us to find meaning even in the most pathetic of situations. Jean-Marc Vallee with his artistic genius and mastery portray this notion of logotherapy in its explicit best. Quoting Nietzsche we can say that, “He who has a *Why* to live for can bear almost any *How*” (Frankl 84).

## References

- Abrams, M. H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning, 2013.
- Cuncic, Arlin. *An Overview of Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy*. Verywellmind. 18 May. 2018. Web, < <https://www.verywellmind.com/an-overview-of-victor-frankl-slogotherapy-4159308>>. Web. 25 April. 2021.
- Frankl, Viktor. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Great Britain, Rider, 2008.
- . *The Unheard Cry for Meaning: Psychotherapy and Humanism*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 2011.
- Kimble, Melvin. *Viktor Frankl's Contribution to Spirituality and Aging*. Haworth Pastoral Press, 2000.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Othe Writings*. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017.
- Strayed, Cheryl. *Wild : From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.
- Wild*. Dir. Jean-Marc Vallee. Perf. Reese Witherspoon, Laura Dern, Gaby Hoffmann and Thomas Sadoski. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014.